

Adult dental health: aging healthfully

Did you know that gum disease – and not the aging process – is the leading cause of tooth loss in adults? Good oral health habits and a healthy lifestyle can help you keep your gums healthy and your smile bright for a lifetime. Developing a simple daily routine of brushing, flossing and eating a balanced diet with plenty of fruits and vegetables is just as important for older adults as it is for younger adults. Here are some tips to help keep your mouth healthy and strong as you get older:

Brush at least twice a day

Brushing your teeth regularly is important in all stages of life. Brushing helps to remove the thin film of bacteria that builds up on your teeth each day and contributes to tooth decay. You should brush your teeth for two to three minutes with fluoridated toothpaste at least twice a day. If you can brush your teeth after every meal, that's even better.

When you brush, you should keep the bristles angled against the gumline and brush along the gumline and the inner and outer surfaces of each tooth. You should finish by brushing your tongue, which helps remove bacteria from your mouth.

Special concerns as you age: Although decay may occur in any area of the tooth, as you age decay is more likely to develop around old fillings or in the softer root of the tooth that is exposed as gums recede. Be sure to visit your dentist regularly so that he or she can keep an eye on these vulnerable areas.

Floss daily

Flossing your teeth can help keep your gums strong and prevent plaque from building up between teeth. Make sure to floss at least once a day, preferably before bed, to clean the places where a toothbrush can't reach.

How important is flossing? According to the Academy of General Dentistry, flossing is the only activity that can remove plaque from between teeth and below the gumline, where decay and gum disease often begin.

Special concerns as you age: Most people don't realize how important it is to take care of their gums as well as their teeth. Gum disease is an infection of the gum tissue and bone that support the teeth and is the leading cause of tooth loss in adults. Most adults show some signs of gum disease.

In addition, recent research has shown that the health of your gums may have a connection to some chronic diseases. Having periodontal (gum) disease has been linked to and may be a risk factor in developing Alzheimer's disease, heart disease or diabetes. Experts are studying how inflammation in the

mouth caused by gum disease may influence other areas of the body (brain, heart and pancreas), causing disease in those areas. Although the exact connection between gum disease and some other chronic diseases is not known, this connection between medical and dental conditions highlights the importance of maintaining good oral health to achieve good overall health.

Eat nutritious food

What you eat can help you keep your teeth. Antioxidants and other nutrients found in fruits, vegetables, legumes and nuts improve your body's ability to fight bacteria and inflammation, helping to protect your teeth and gums.

Some foods may actually help defend against tooth decay in special ways. For instance, recent studies have indicated that fresh cranberries interrupt the bonding of oral bacteria before they can form damaging plaque. Other foods that have beneficial effects on oral health include:

- Calcium-fortified juices, milk and other dairy products, which are rich in calcium and vitamin D, help promote healthy teeth and bones, and reduce the risk for tooth loss.
- Cheese, which unleashes a burst of calcium that mixes with plaque and sticks to the teeth, protecting them from the acid that causes decay and helping to rebuild tooth enamel on the spot.
- Crisp fruits and raw vegetables like apples, carrots and celery, which help clean plaque from teeth and freshen breath.

Special concerns as you age: Experiencing tooth pain or other oral problems may affect your ability to eat nutritious food. You should visit your dentist right away if you are experiencing any tooth pain, jaw pain, mouth sores or other oral discomfort that interferes with your ability to eat.

Keep up with dentist appointments

Your dentist can diagnose and treat dental health problems before they become serious. Regular dental check-ups and cleanings are an important part of maintaining good dental health as you age.

New research suggests that the health of your mouth mirrors the condition of your body as a whole. For example, when your mouth is healthy, chances are your overall health is good, too. On the other hand, if you have poor oral health, you may have other health problems. So, seeing a dentist regularly not only helps to keep your mouth in top shape, but also allows your dentist to watch for developments that may point to other health issues.

Special concerns as you age: As you age, you become more vulnerable to developing chronic diseases such as diabetes, osteoporosis and heart disease. Researchers believe that symptoms of these diseases can manifest themselves in the mouth, making dentists key in diagnosing the diseases. In fact, your dentist may be the first health professional to notice a problem.

In addition, it is important to visit your dentist regularly because some oral problems, for instance root decay, can only be detected in its early stages by x-ray examination.

If you smoke, quit

In addition to increasing your risk of many health conditions, smoking can increase your risk of tooth decay and gum disease. Smokers are about twice as likely to lose their teeth as non-smokers, according to two 30-year studies at Tufts University that investigated the relationship between smoking and tooth loss. Another study cited in the Journal of Dental Research shows that cigarette smokers are nearly twice as likely as non-smokers to need root canal treatment.

While most people are aware of the impact tobacco use has on their overall health, some might not consider its effects on oral health. Smoking increases risk of mouth pain, cavities, gum recession, gum (periodontal) disease and tooth loss. In fact, an estimated 50 percent of adults who smoke have gum disease.

The good news is that the risk of tooth loss decreases after you quit smoking. To help you kick the habit, your dentist may prescribe a variety of nicotine replacement therapies, such as a transdermal nicotine patch (worn for 24 hours over several weeks with a dissipating flow of nicotine) or chewing gum (which is slowly chewed every one to two hours and then discarded).

Special concerns as you age: In addition to increasing your risk for gum disease and tooth loss, smoking increases your risk for oral cancer. Although oral cancer can occur in any age group, it most often occurs in people over 40 years of age. See a dentist immediately if you notice any red or white patches on your gums, tongue or other oral tissues, and watch for sores that fail to heal within two weeks. Unfortunately, oral cancer is often difficult to detect in its early stages, when it can be cured more easily. Your dentist should perform a head and neck exam to screen for signs of cancer at your regular checkups.

Information courtesy of the [Academy of General Dentistry](#)